

## Reflections

### My Reflections on Spiritual Abuse

Rami Nsour

Recognizing, understanding, and responding appropriately to systems of oppression (*dhulm*) is a part of our *deen* (practice of Islam). One such system is spiritual or religious abuse, two terms I will define. Spiritual abuse is not specific to Islam or Muslims, for it can be found among members of any religious or spiritual tradition. My personal experience has been directly responding to spiritual abuse as it pertains to Muslims and studying how it fits within a Shariah framework. I will discuss some of this term's current uses, provide a Shariah-based working definition of this concept, and then present several areas where I have seen it appear as a pattern among Muslims in terms of parent-child, teacher-student, and spousal relationships.

This is neither an end-all nor an exhaustive analysis of the issue, but only an additional voice to it. Addressing this complex matter, or any abuse perpetrated using religion, requires a complex response. As there is no pre-existing template or ready-made book or chapter, the concerned members of our community must discuss and work toward practical solutions. As Muslims, we are obliged to develop our ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood and to stop the abuser from carrying out further abuse. Therefore, Muslim individuals and communities must formulate methods of prevention, intervention, and postvention.

### Defining Terms

Defining terms has been an essential part of any scholarly Islamic discipline since the earliest days of Islam. Individual scholars or entire schools of thought define how they use terms (*istilah*) and exactly what they mean by them. The Shariah also takes into consideration the common or cultural uses (*'urf*) of languages, which can have a direct impact on rulings. Thus, we should view "spiritual abuse" from both the point of *istilah* as well as *'urf*.

Something as seemingly simple as the word "difference" (*khilaf*) has to be prefaced and qualified for it to be properly understood per the context of how the author uses it. The Turkish scholar and soldier Khalil ibn Ishaq (d. 767/1365) begins his text with specific definitions of *khilaf*, *taraddud* (wavering), *istihsan* (preference), and other terms to discuss varying opinions. For example, *sunnah* holds many meanings depending on which scholar, school of thought, or discipline one uses it in. Examples like *sunnah* or *khilaf* may be more agreeable to some as examples of technical vocabulary usage since they are within our

tradition. Over the centuries, other terms were borrowed from other traditions because they captured in a single word a well-accepted Islamic concept.

To many, *mutawatir* may seem to have always been part and parcel of Islamic scholarship. Dr. Suheil Ismail Laher, in his excellent PhD dissertation<sup>1</sup> on this concept, says, “Arab philosophers likely imported the *tawātur* concept from the Greek empiricists.” In another example, many scholars used *al kimiya* (alchemy). Ghazali even used it in the title of one of his most famous books: *The Alchemy of Happiness (Kimiya e Sa’adat)*. Scholars, recognizing the problems of using similar terms in different ways, focused on how to handle this problem.

One very old and well-known scholarly principle states: “There is no squabbling over terminology (*la mushahatta fil istilah*).” In short, if the term’s meaning is not fully agreed upon, each party should explain how they define it and what they *mean* when they use it. If they agree on the definition but not on the terminology to use, their ensuing discussion(s) should focus on the meaning they are trying to convey. One of the first tasks of any debate is to define the relevant terms. Even debate clubs do this.

Some people will continue to argue over terminology (*mushatal istilah*), like those who argue that “Islamophobia” should not be used when referring to the systematic degradation of Islam. I will respond to those critics with the same words of Dr. Hatem Bazian, one of the world’s leading experts on Islamophobia, when I asked him for his opinion. He said, “That train has left the station.” I say to those who oppose the use of this term that while they continue to argue how many angels can fit on the head of a needle, the rest of us need to work toward preventing and treating the issues caused by spiritual abuse.

Another very important point to consider is the term common (*‘urfi*) usage. Our *deen* (practice of Islam) requires that certain devotional (*ta’abuddi*) utterances must be done exactly as they have been narrated and transmitted to us, such as what to say in prayer and how to do *talbiyya* for hajj. Other things require only a correct intention (*niyyah*). If the Shariah does not define how the term is to be used and there is no specific intention, then we fall back to looking at it through the *‘urf* of that particular area at that particular time. For example, the Malikis consider that a very specific wording must occur when conducting a marriage, whereas the Hanafis allow for the common usages. If we look at other elements of law, such as oaths (*yamin*), agency (*wakala*), bequests (*wasiyya*), and endowments (*awqaf*), we find that scholars refer to the term’s common usage in the absence of a clear Shariah definition or stated intention. In such cases, we

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<sup>1</sup> Laher, S. I. (n.d.). Twisted threads: Genesis, development and application of the term and concept of Tawatur in Islamic thought (dissertation).

must ask: If a person sets up an endowment (*waqf*) or a bequest (*wasiya*) to research or help victims of spiritual abuse, who should receive those funds? If a person swears an oath (*yamin*) or makes a statement of divorce (*talaq*) and has that statement connected to “spiritual abuse,” how would we formulate the relevant ruling (*hukm*)? Therefore, we must analyze how the term is being used in both common and specific technical language.

### Defining Spiritual Abuse

Using the Ngram search function of Google, one finds uses of “religious abuse” and “spiritual abuse” as far back as the early 1800s. Spiritual abuse is sometimes used synonymously with religious abuse. One reason for the distinction is the modern usage of “spirituality” to refer to an individual’s practice of connecting to something otherworldly, whereas “religion” refers to practice within the confines of a specific organized religion, as in the now common statement of “I am spiritual but not religious.” In this article, I will consider both terms as one and the same in that they are part of one’s *deen*.

In the United States, some of the earliest uses of “spiritual abuse” in print go back to the 1950s. A recent article in Web MD<sup>2</sup> defines this term as “any attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs can be spiritual abuse” and that “spiritual abuse can happen within a religious organization or a personal relationship.” The website Spiritual Abuse Resources<sup>3</sup> states that “some apply the term *spiritual abuse* to any kind of psychological, physical, or sexual abuse that takes place in a religious context,” whereas “others apply the term specifically to manipulations that damage a person’s relationship to God or to his/her core self.” On the *In Shaykh’s Clothing* website, Danish Qasim says that they specifically use it to refer to “the misuse of religious position.”<sup>4</sup>

Wright<sup>5</sup> (2001) says that, “Religious abuse is abuse administered under the guise of religion, including harassment or humiliation, which may result in psychological trauma. Religious abuse may also include misuse of religion for selfish, secular, or ideological ends such as the abuse of a clerical position.”

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<sup>2</sup> Contributors, W. M. D. E. (n.d.). *Spiritual abuse: How to identify it and find help*. WebMD. Retrieved October 7, 2021, from <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/signs-spiritual-abuse>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spiritualabuseresources.com/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://inshaykhsclathing.com/home/intro/defining-spiritual-abuse-how-and-why-we-use-the-term/#\\_ftn1](https://inshaykhsclathing.com/home/intro/defining-spiritual-abuse-how-and-why-we-use-the-term/#_ftn1)

<sup>5</sup> Wright, Keith T. (2001). *Religious Abuse: A Pastor Explores the Many Ways Religion Can Hurt As Well As Heal*. Kelowna, B.C: Northstone Publishing.

Salma Abugideiri<sup>6</sup> says that “spiritual abuse is used to refer to a wide number of things,” that “in a family context, we use the term spiritual abuse to refer to anything that interferes with someone’s spirituality or religious practice,” and that when it is perpetrated by a religious leader, it is abuse of the position of trust by transgressing boundaries against vulnerable people. Jeff VanVonderen,<sup>7</sup> one of this topic’s most prolific writers, researchers, and speakers, says that,

Spiritual abuse occurs when someone in a position of spiritual authority, the purpose of which is to 'come underneath' and serve, build, equip and make a deity's or a God's people MORE free, misuses that authority placing themselves over a God's people to control, coerce or manipulate them for seemingly godly purposes which are really their own.

From the above definitions, I posit three areas of potential abuse that directly correlate to principles in our *deen*: 1) misapplying one of its elements (*ghish*), 2) misusing a position of trust (*al aklu bil deen* or *khiyanatul amanah*), or 3) distorting the religion’s principles or teachings (*talbis*). In all cases, the end result is taking the right (*haqq*) of another person, which is transgression (*baghy*). This framework provides a Shariah-based working definition of spiritual abuse.

### **Taking the Right of Another**

Muhammad Mawlud, in his concise text *Mat-hartul Qulub (The Purifier of the Hearts)*, says, “As for transgression (*baghy*), the author of *Fathul Haqq*<sup>8</sup> defines it as ‘Harming another person without a right.’” In the commentary (*sharh*) on this line, Muhammad Al Hasan Ould Ahmad al Khadim says, “*Baghy* (transgression) is [synonymous] with *dhulm* (oppression) and *ta’ady* (trespassing).” I would like to focus the reader’s attention on the definition of oppression or transgression as it relates to harming them (*idhayah*). In his *Prohibitions of the Tongue*, Mawlud lists over 70 such matters, one of which is “bothering/harm,” and then says, “And the forms of that bothering are many.” This indicates that the many forms of harm will vary from person to person. So, we have specific rights (*huquq*), some of which are well-defined, that must be protected. Others have to do with the person’s emotions and what would bother or harm him or her.

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<sup>6</sup> Daigle, C. (2018, August 12). *Understanding spiritual abuse: An interview with Salma Abugideiri*. Ottawa Muslims, Islam in Ottawa, Muslims in Ottawa, Ottawa Prayer Times, Muslim Link Ottawa, Muslims in Gatineau, Islam in Gatineau, Muslim Link, Ottawa News, Ottawa Muslim Events, Muslim Businesses, Ottawa Halal Restaurants, Halal Restaurants in Ottawa, muslimlink, ottawa, news, events, halal. Retrieved October 7, 2021, from <https://muslimlink.ca/stories/muslim-spiritual-abuse-salma-abugideiri>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.churchexiters.com/spiritual-abuse/>

<sup>8</sup> Shaykh Muhamdhan Fal ibn Muttali

All Muslims agree that taking the right (*haqq*) of another person is transgression, oppression, and wrong. Some may reject the qualifier “spiritual” or “religious” being added to that and ask, “Why can’t we just call it oppression or abuse?” I would respond by pointing out the following: First, qualifiers distinguish specific types of transgressions from a general transgression (e.g., child abuse or police brutality). Would the person who rejects “spiritual abuse” also reject “child abuse”? Second, I contend that we find such usages in our tradition.

### **Religious Harm (*Darar Deeni*)**

When discussing the spiritual disease of cheating (*ghish*), Mawlud says, “Ghish is defined as concealing a religious harm (*darar deeni*) even from a *dhimmi*<sup>9</sup> or a *mu’ahad*,<sup>10</sup> while others define it as embellishing (*tazyin*) what is not the most beneficial thing.”

It amazes me that a man in the Saharan desert, living long before European colonization, would use a term such as “religious harm” (*darar deeni*) long before anyone in the West was using the terms “religious abuse” or “spiritual abuse.” Yet, some members of our communities still reject the concept of spiritual abuse because it is somehow a liberal, Western, feminist concept. But let’s take a moment to reflect on this second definition of *ghish* and the subtlety our scholars are pointing us to: thinking about the best interest of someone else, that taking that away is a form of cheating (*ghish*). As our Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever cheats us is not from us.”

I would also like to draw the reader’s attention to the second definition, “glamorizing what is not the most beneficial thing,” a clear articulation of the concept of “best interest.” This also has a base within our Shariah, one that was developed independent of the West’s use of that term. Later in this paper I will use an example of a teacher (*shaykh*) who proposed secret second marriages to his female students and was very clear in his attempt to embellish that which was not in their best interest (*maslahah*).

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<sup>9</sup> Non-Muslims living in a Muslim country.

<sup>10</sup> Non-Muslims living in a non-Muslim country that has a pact (*’ahd*) with the Muslims. In our day and age, almost every non-Muslim country has Muslim country embassies, along with their own embassies in Muslim countries and allows Muslims to live in them via visas, residencies, or citizenship, thereby making most, if not all, non-Muslims *mu’ahids*.

### Misusing a Position of Trust (*Khiyanatul Amanah*)

I began a serious study of Islam during my late teens in the Bay Area and then, at 18, travelled to Mauritania. The second book I studied with my teachers there was *The Mukhtasar of Akhdari* by the great Algerian scholar Imam Abdur Rahman al Akhdari (d. 983/1575).<sup>11</sup> Although this text primarily covers the Maliki school's legal rulings (*fiqh*), he begins with a general chapter that outlines some core Shariah concepts. Among the most fascinating ones was, "And [also from the prohibited matters] is devouring the wealth of others without them liking it, as well as devouring through intercession and debt."<sup>12</sup> Of the three concepts here, I would like to focus on the first and the third ones.

The first concept, that of devouring wealth without people liking it, is taken from "O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth through *falsehood*, but only [in lawful] business by *mutual consent*" (Quran 4:29). This includes theft, along with every kind of prohibited devouring of wealth. Additionally, the verse states that consuming wealth through business transactions is allowed only if it is done with mutual consent (*taradiyy*), or, as Imam al Akhdari says, not "without them liking it." I remember asking one of my teachers to provide an example, and he replied, "a person who pesters and pesters until you give him something."

In the third ruling, the author discusses "devouring through debt," after mentioning devouring through these, that two related rules come from the principal summarized by Abdul Wahid Ibn Ashir in a line of poetry and taught to me by Shaykh Tahir Ould Murabit al Hajj: "Debts, guarantorship (*daman*), and intercession are prohibited to be used for other than the sake of Allah."<sup>13</sup> So it makes sense that Imam al Akhdari mentions both debts and intercession. One cannot benefit materially from a debtor while the debt is still standing and would be considered a form of *riba*. We are encouraged to loan money, but not to benefit from the debt.

Another narration of this text has a *fatha* on the *daal*, making it "deen" instead of "dayn." Imam al Akhdari is saying that using religion (*deen*) to devour

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<sup>11</sup> I translated and recorded this text in 2004 to be taught in American prisons. This course would later culminate in the Tayba Foundation in 2008, which delivers Islamic education by correspondence to Muslims prisoners in the United States. That translation is freely available on this site: <http://malikifiqhqa.com/uncategorized/explanation-of-the-kitab-al-akhdari/>

<sup>12</sup> وَأَكْلُ أَمْوَالِ النَّاسِ بِغَيْرِ طَيْبِ النَّفْسِ وَالْأَكْلُ بِالشَّفَاعَةِ أَوْ بِالذَّيْنِ

<sup>13</sup> القرض والضمان رفق الجاه \*\* تمنع أن ترى لغير الله

the people's wealth is also prohibited. With that, I was taught a concept that resonated with me because I knew it was true even before my formal study of the Shariah: That charlatans take advantage of the people's trust for their own benefit. This ruling not only applies to taking wealth from people, but also to benefitting from doing so in any way, such as through service or putting on a facade of religious adherence. Importantly, this ruling has nothing to do with being paid for teaching the Quran or leading prayers, but with presenting a religious image to derive benefit from or to misuse the standing that one gains through his or her position.

This began a series of long discussions with my teachers about how people use the *deen* to gain things. They encouraged me to read Ibn al Hajj's *Madkhal*, which discusses both rectifying our intentions so they align with the Sunnah and how to avoid innovation (*bid'ah*). Ibn al Hajj spends a copious amount of time discussing how scholars go astray, the signs and tricks, and how to avoid them and warn people. Understanding this subtleness of our beautiful *deen* enables us to develop complex thinking while trying to comprehend these principles. Al Barkawi says in his text on *usul al hadith*, "It is not permissible to teach the sinners who are seekers of knowledge who use their knowledge as a means towards evil [and sinning]." Commenting on this line, Yusuf Al Kharbuti says, "Likewise are the shaykhs (*mashayikh*) of our time, as they use their spiritual practices (*suluk*) as a tool to gain worldly things (*dunya*) and we seek refuge in Allah from the evil of ourselves."<sup>14</sup> I wonder if contemporary people who adamantly oppose efforts to hold Muslim leaders to account would call these scholars "imam hunters."

In the *Mat-hartul Qulub (Purifier of the Hearts)*, Shaykh Muhammad Mawlood discussed various forms that religious showing off (*riyaa'*) can take. He says:

*Riyaa'* is defined as performing an act for someone other than the Creator to seek a benefit or praise from the creation, or to avoid harm. The worst type of *riyaa'* is the one who uses religion as a means to a sin, like the person who exhibits religious caution (*wara'*) so that people put in his trust the wealth of orphans.

Those who use religion to gain positions of trust and to take advantage of others are guilty of one of the worst sins.

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<sup>14</sup> حاشية الشيخ يوسف الخربوتي على شرح أصول الحديث لداود القارصي على رسالة البركوي

Spiritual abuse occurs when any person uses the religion or a religious position of trust (*amanah*) to take that to which they have no right (*haqq*); to coerce someone into doing what is not in their best interest; to take advantage of; and to harass, bully, ridicule, criticize, or otherwise transgress the established boundaries (*hudud*) of Allah. This use of religion or religious position is one form of spiritual abuse. Another and even more serious form of spiritual abuse takes place when the person distorts the religion.

### **Talbis: Distorting the Religion’s Principles or Teachings**

To begin my discussion of distorting the *deen*, I turn to Shaykh Muhammad Mawlud’s<sup>15</sup> *The Prohibition of the Tongue (Maharim al Lisan)*. The author begins by stating that he wrote it after noticing that many seekers of knowledge focused on deep studies of law (*fiqh*), including many laws that would never be practically implemented, while knowing little of the rules of speech. Moreover, this occurs on a daily basis. Unlike *The Purifier of the Hearts*, in which he listed the 32 diseases of the heart alphabetically, he seems to have no system when listing more than 70 prohibitions of the tongue. In fact, I often wondered why he started with the point that he did.

This first topic was “Referring positively to something the Shariah has deemed blameworthy and referring negatively to something the Shariah deemed praiseworthy,” based on the concept of *talbis al haqq* (concealing the truth with falsehood) referred to in “Do not mix truth with falsehood or hide the truth knowingly” (2:42). A few of the many examples refer to dating as da’wah or the hijab as oppression. Such doublespeak in politics and media makes otherwise detestable things more palatable, such as calling indiscriminate murder “collateral damage” or an imperial invasion “spreading democracy.”

I wondered why the author didn’t start with some of the more apparent prohibitions of the tongue, like backbiting (*ghiba*) or carrying tales (*namima*). Then I understood; deception can undermine the Shariah in ways that sinning cannot. For example, people can deceive themselves and then deceive others, as is the case with backbiting (*ghiba*). When those who engage in it know it is wrong, there is a chance they will repent. Even if they do not, they will still know in their hearts that what they are doing is wrong. But when those who refer to it as being something good, they are less likely to repent because they do not see it as

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<sup>15</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Mawlud’s books are a central part of studying the Shariah in Mauritania’s Mahdara system. There is much to be said about the uniqueness of how the author chooses and presents topics. More can be found on this topic in my introduction to the translation of his “The Rights of Parents” poem.

something wrong. I still remember when a person I had asked to stop speaking about another person told me, “This is not *ghiba*... this is scientific evaluation.”

When the deception (*talbis*) reaches the level of using the *deen*, it becomes even more problematic. Calling *ghiba* by a religious name, like advice (*nasihah*) or a warning (*tahdhir*), causes the deception to rise to the level of religious deception. This type of deception, which is at the heart of *bid'ah*, is more dangerous than sinning without a form of deception. In the *Madkhal*, Ibn al Hajj mentions a statement by one of the Salaf, “If you are told that a mountain has been removed, then believe it. But if you are told that an innovator (*bid'i*) has repented, then don't believe it.” Ibn Al Jawzi's *Talbis Iblis*, an amazing exposition of the innovators' mindset, details all types of innovation that characterize each of Islam's 72 sects and then says that once a person knows each type, any future innovator is just one of those groups or an amalgamation of more than one of them.

A serious study of deception, especially religious deception, is a core part of our faith and a great protective factor against spiritual abuse. The Hadith of Jibril, which outlines four major areas of our *deen*, was in the format of a series of questions. The fourth question was about the End Times and its signs. When outlining Islam, many people only mention the first three. I believe the fourth question reminds us that we live in a real world, that believers are obliged to recognize the time in which they live, and that they are to prepare for the End Times and its biggest trial (*fitnah*): The False Messiah (*Al Masih Al Dajjal*).

The Dajjal is the epitome of deception. One could even translate his name as the Deceiving Christ or Messiah, for he builds his acceptance through an existing system of religion; people love and respect Jesus Christ ('Isa, *alayhi salam*) and are waiting for his return. He builds on that and, through deception, gains his position. He does not just tell people that he will rule and that they should follow but taps into their need to believe in a higher power and that it has representatives on earth. As a teenager, I loved learning about the Dajjal and the End Times. Based on all the youth groups I have led I know it is still one of the most popular topics. In fact, we are learning how to recognize imposters when we read those hadith, preparing for the nearly 30 lesser ones who will come before him, and preparing ourselves for any of the many micro imposters or even true Muslims who exhibit elements of deception (*dajal*).

I have often reflected on why we have been instructed to read *Sura al Kahf* every Friday as a protection against the Dajjal. I thought about how this being has a system of oppression and deception. Then in looking at some of this sura's themes, I noticed a pattern: It is an analysis of powerful systems in our world, namely, polytheistic governmental systems from which the young men fled and the righteous governmental system in which they awoke. Economic systems are discussed through the story of the two men and the garden, and an exposition of

systems of knowledge with Musa and Khidr (*alayhimus salam*). Dhul Qarnayn's story recounts a righteous leader's system overtaking unrighteous governmental systems. I even find an indication of considering the welfare system in the advice to not turn away from those who remember Allah, the Ahlul Suffa. We have to be aware of the times in which we live and the systems of those people who seek to deceive us.

And finally, we must recognize that some matters of our religion are clear cut and allow no interpretation (*ta'weel*). There are matters of which there can be varying interpretations as long as they are reasonable. If an unreasonable interpretation (*ta'wil ba'id*) gets stretched even further, it is referred to as a distortion (*tahrif*).

A family or a community who does not respond appropriately to a case of abuse (*baghy*) could be guilty of the sin of not stopping harm when they could have done so. There could also be one or more elements of spiritual abuse using the three Shariah concepts outlined earlier. The most common form used by the abuser's enablers is manipulating the *deen* (*talbis*).

### **Shutting Down Responses to Abuse**

When victims of abuse try to bring up what was done to them or attempts to address such instances are brought up, many times they are shut down by others, especially those closest to the abuser. This applies in all domains – child, sexual, and workplace abuse, to name just a few. This is also the case with Muslims. This shutting down is most alarming when it comes from people who have actually studied Islam seriously. One common pattern here is using subjective ideas or objective rulings or principles, but in a very subjective manner.

This method of distorting and manipulating the *deen* is a common sign of the End Times, as the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Every person who can hold an opinion will be impressed by their opinion.” To counter this type of cognitive distortion, Muslims need to devise a check and balance system by looking critically within our tradition and talking with those who have extensive relevant experience, both through study and experience, to formulate an appropriate and realistic response. Examples are claiming that reporting abuse is “bad *adab*,” holding negative opinions (*su'ul dhann*), exposing sins, or that the “proper Islamic process” is not being followed. In each of these cases, the abuser's protectors cannot provide objective terms and applications of the principles they are citing.

In the case of the citing bad “*adab*” (proper etiquette), most often the people are presenting their own opinions, feelings, emotions, or sentiments as very objective definitions of “proper Islamic *adab*.” This is now commonly referred to those working in the field as “playing the *adab* card.”

Another common example is that reporting and/or addressing abuse is “exposing sins.” While they are correct that part of our religion dictates that sins

should not be exposed, there are very specific rules as to when, where, and what should be exposed. These very objective guidelines are detailed by the scholars ('ulema) of the Shariah who examined the instances when the Prophet ﷺ allowed people's sins to be discussed in their presence. Detailing such discussions is beyond the scope of this paper but suffice it to say that if you ask the average person who uses this "card" to define the terms and boundaries, he or she will most likely be unable to do so. In his commentary on Mawlud's *The Prohibitions of the Tongue*, Muhammad al Hasan, says:

Ibn Ḥamdūn mentions that Ibn 'Arafa, in the *Takmīl*, states that "A person who is involved in courts (*qadaa'*) or counsel (*shuraa'*) related to Sharī'a affairs should listen to what is said about a person or people who are followed. This is done with the intention of implementing the rules of justness and defamation, not with the intention of enjoyment. This is not considered to be backbiting and avoiding it would cause a breakdown in judgments or giving positions to those who are not deserving of them. If this was not the case, it would have not been possible to establish the defamation of a narrator, witness or other." This is supported by the ḥadīth that states that the Prophet ﷺ would ask others about what is going on with certain people and that he ordered people to be given their due positions.

A third concept that is frequently misapplied by such people is holding a negative opinion or not giving the benefit of the doubt (*su'ul dhan*). While we definitely find these concepts in the Quran and Sunnah, which attests to their objectivity, many people will use this term subjectively and cannot even define the objective boundaries of its meaning, not to mention its proper understanding and the permitted exceptions. Most people using the suspicion card will make it seem as if all suspicion is forbidden, despite, "Avoid *most* suspicion, for verily *some* suspicion is sin" (49:12). Clearly, there are exceptions to this general principle, for Allah said "most" (not all) and "some" (not all). Mawlud, in his *Purifier of the Hearts*, outlines this by saying, "Some suspicion (*dhann*) is not permissible, such as holding a negative opinion about someone who outwardly appears righteous. There is no sin in doubt (*shakk*) nor that which is based upon some proof, as that is substantiated." The scholars of *usul* distinguish between *dhann* and *shakk*, with *shakk* being 50/50 doubt that has no proof or reason for the doubt, while *dhann* is more than 50% and has a proof. Based on this, we see a clear definition of forbidden *dhann*: unsubstantiated suspicion (*mujarrad*) that is beyond doubt (*shakk*). This is why Imam Ghazali said in his *Ihya'*, "Whatever you do not see with your eyes or hear with your ears, and yet something comes into your heart, then know that it is from Shaytan and that you are obligated to disbelieve it."

Most people who present the principle of holding a good opinion (*husnul dhann*) fail to present the exceptions to that principle or provide a clear definition

of the term to begin with. They will not mention that scholars have narrated many statements about being careful by being suspicious, some of which have been recorded from the Sahaba and the Tabi'een, such as, "Whoever thinks good a lot about people will have a lot of regret," "Safety is in suspicion (*su'ul dhann*)," and "Beware of people by having suspicion." Al-Ajlouni dedicated an entire work to balancing the concept of negative suspicion with that of giving the benefit of the doubt (*husnul dhann*). Ahmad Zarruq said, "Do not entrust anyone with your family, wealth or religion (*deen*) unless you have tried them one million times."

There are many more examples of how people avoid properly dealing with instances of abuse and not holding abusers accountable. People may say things like "That's his/her personal life," "I do not condone or condemn what occurred," "He speaks the truth and is important for calling to Islam (*da'wah*)," "This will make Islam/Muslims look bad," along with a myriad of other foolish responses. We could dissect each of these individually and see what is behind them and at their root. I will end with two very common and related methods. Detractors will say, "You are making a big deal about it" or something similar, thereby belittling the abuse/oppression and pivoting any criticism to the person bringing the issue to light. In short, they make the issue about how someone is bringing it up.

### **The "Proper" Process to Respond to Spiritual Abuse**

Another common response is, "You are not going through the right [or *Islamic*] process." This response makes many assumptions, including the apparent default response that the "Islamic" process is to not address the issue, that the person doing so is at fault, and that there is a well-defined, neatly packaged, pre-templated method to address such issues. The reality is that no specific chapter or section of any *fiqh* book deals with this specific instance, as proven by the fact that those who use the "proper Islamic method" card cannot explain exactly what that method is. They also ignore that part of the Islamic tradition of knowledge consists of scouring the available texts and compiling relevant sources to address the issues of their times. Mawlud states that the scholars of every age must undertake this process of compilation (*tadwin*). In his commentary on that point, Muhammad al Hasan says that Zarruq's authorship of the *Nasiha* was an example of fulfilling this obligation.

Modern examples are plenty, among them bioethics and all contemporary fatwas related to the advances of modern medicine. Many efforts have been made to scour the traditional sources to find an appropriate response from within our tradition. In a similar fashion, addressing all forms spiritual abuse must be undertaken to devise a practical and realistic framework and methodology.

Another core issue is that those who are calling for the "Islamic" response have very little or no training in the Shariah, as they make blatant mistakes or erroneous claims, or, if they have training, do not know the proper application.

This latter ability is a skill in and of itself, one that is developed through a series of practice and feedback from both experts and peers. I strongly believe that most Islamic seminary systems have a great deal to learn from the modern medical field in terms of systemized practices, internships, and residencies. Our tradition contains many examples of how our scholars learned from non-scholars who had more experience in the practical application of the Shariah. Ibn Al Jawzi related a story of Abu Hanifa being corrected by a barber who was an expert in the rules and etiquette related to cutting hair on the hajj due to his extensive experience in the field. I heard of a Mauritanian scholar who, upon entering the masjid in Mecca, was about to begin praying the greeting prayer (*tahiyyatul masjid*) when a local man passed by and said, “O shaykh, the *tahiyya* of the masjid of Mecca is *tawaf*.” The scholar was reminded of this rule, which he had memorized, studied and taught. I experienced this when I pointed out to some ‘ulema in Mauritania their misunderstanding of a particular ruling on wiping over leather socks (*khuff*) because they never had worn or wiped over them; however, they had studied and taught the rulings from the books.

This does not detract from our great scholars, for “one may find in the river what is not found in the ocean” as the Arabic<sup>16</sup> saying goes. It also reminds us that a rule’s proper application depends on a proper conceptualization of the matter being ruled upon (*al hukmu ‘ala shay’ far tasawwurihi*). As Muslims, we must be both savvy consumers of products and media and of Islamic rulings (fatwas).

### **A Case Study of Deception (*Talbis*) by Abuser Enablers**

In this regard, I cite the 2014 case of Abdullah Saleem,<sup>17</sup> a case of a very accomplished Muslim scholar who used his position in the community to abuse and take advantage of people under his care. We do not know how many instances of abuse occurred, because not everyone reported what had happened. In one instance, when a minor reported a sexual assault to a female schoolteacher (who is by law a mandated reporter), she said, “Saleem is an old man and old people do things like that, so just forget about it.” In short, she minimized the abuse and made the issue about the person reporting it.

Not included in the online reports is that Saleem took female minors into a closed room and rubbed their naked bodies to “extract” jinn. One victim reached out to an email list of “ulema,” who would have been graduates of the Dars-E-

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<sup>16</sup> The Arabic is: يوجد في الأنهار ما لا يوجد في البحار

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.facetogether.org/us-and-canada/mohammad-saleem>

Nizami six-year Alim curriculum, which contains a fair amount of legal thought (*usul al fiqh*) and laws (*fiqh*). Some of the ulema said it was wrong, and others sought to justify this type of *ruqya* on the grounds that the person was a shaykh and had the ability to do this.

What those ulema ignored was that even a doctor who is allowed to remove a patient's clothing is not allowed to be in seclusion (*khalwa*) with him or her. A close male relative (*mahram*) or enough medical staff must be present to prevent such seclusion. Secondly, the doctor is only allowed to do treatments that are time tested (*mujarrab*). Thirdly, parents who entrust a minor to a boarding school with a teacher have only given him or her a limited entrustment (*wakala*). Therefore, any procedure must have parental permission (*idhnul wali*). Fourthly, and the most glaring contradiction, is that all treatments must be in line with the Shariah and any use of something non-permissible must be scrutinized according to an even higher amount of testing (*tajriba*), peer review, and check and balance before being utilized.

Imagine the feelings of a 16-year-old girl who was courageous enough to bring up what a trusted person had done to her only to be shut down by some of those who used religious terms like "shaykh" and "*ruqya*" to justify this horrendous sexual assault. Some on the list did push back and gave the proper response; however, the fact that the others responded as they did shows that there is no clear-cut definition of what the "Islamic" approach is. Would we expect those ulema on the list to have a sophisticated response to a matter of bioethics from a few years of Shariah study, or only after they have been trained in that specific area and had their opinions peer-reviewed?

Another example from this community points out a glaring lack of knowledge of a ruling's application as well as of the specific ruling itself. This reality becomes even more shocking when the reaction comes from some imams, seekers of knowledge (*tullab al 'ilm*) and "ulema." One of these victims as a woman in her early 20s at the time. Saleem has signed a confession of what he had done to her. When people began discussing the matter, some said it should not be discussed because it falls into the category of *qadhif*, someone makes an accusation of prohibited sexual intercourse (*zina*). The problem is that *qadhif* refers only to the major form of *zina*, namely, sexual penetration, not to cases like kissing or fondling. The fact that people who are representative of the Shariah (e.g., students, teachers, imams, *shuyukh*, *ustadhs* or ulema) would attempt to shut down this young sister by using the *qadhif* ruling both distorts and manipulates the *deen*. In other words, this very action is in and of itself a case of spiritual abuse, as is the case of Saleem who exploited his religious position and the community's trust to oppress young women.

### Spiritual Abuse Types

Spiritual abuse takes many forms. I will briefly look at three of them: 1) parents with their children, 2) spouses with each other, and 3) teachers/leaders with their students/congregants. Parents who abuse their children and use *deen*-related ideas to do so or prevent any opposition are guilty of spiritual abuse, as are spouses who use the *deen* to cloak (*talbis*) their oppression. This is also true of leaders who use it to take that to which they have no right, to goad a person into doing what is not in his or her best interest, and when extremist groups manipulate young people to commit an atrocity. In all of these examples, they are taking the right (*haqq*) of another person and, by not doing what's in that person's best interest (*ghish*); they are transgressing (*baghy*) the boundaries (*hudud*) of Allah and manipulating (*talbis*) the *deen*'s concepts to further their efforts to gain more power, wealth, control, obedience, and so on.

### Parents as Spiritual Abusers

One sign of the End Times is that the disrespect of parents (*'uquq*) will increase. Many people, especially those in positions of community leadership, can attest to this. In my experience, such children have rarely, if ever, justified their sin with religious explanations (*ta'weel*). On the other hand, in almost every case I am aware of where it was the parent abusing the child, there has almost always been an element of distorting and manipulating the *deen*. And just like most community leaders have seen their fair share of religious counseling and are aware of these issues, I have also had an opportunity to see this firsthand. I translated and have taught Mawlud's *Rights of Parents* both in person and online to thousands of students.

While the book has had an amazing impact on most of those who have studied it and drastically improved the children's relationship with their parents (from as young as 6 to as old as 60), the main question I receive after teaching it is a very sobering one: How can I respect my parents (*birr al walidayn*) when they have abused me? In all these cases, some of which are very sad to recollect even now, the dynamics of misusing the *deen* are clear. The parent almost always justifies his or her actions through it, and the child accepts the abuse, even into adulthood. The children (when I say "children" I am talking about adult children as well) who are more attached to the *deen* are more at risk, because they view it as very special and sacred. So, when a parent "plays that card," it immediately resonates with the children. Doing so is a clear form of spiritual abuse according to how the term should be used.

Among the many forms of spiritual abuse is the following: Parents who harm (does *baghy* to) their child and then insist that the child visit them in person because they are entitled to such a visit. In reality, they are manipulating the *deen* to further this *baghy*. Parents who have unreasonable expectations of what their

children must do to please them and then claim they will hold back their acceptance (*rida*) of them if these expectations are not met are also guilty of spiritual abuse. These are just a few of the many examples I have seen play out in the lives of people who have sought my counsel.

For these children, I recommend learning how to deal with toxic parents, toxic relationships, narcissistic parents, and how to draw healthy boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Part of my approach is to explain to them that it is okay to keep their distance in whatever manner is in their own best interest. For so many people, my telling them that they are not disobedient children because they want less contact is liberating. Some of them have maintained a connection, even if it is toxic, harmful, and/or full of aggression, only because they fear being disrespectful, a fear that is almost always confirmed by the abusing parent. I also recommend that anyone who has a close relationship with a religious leader become familiar with the signs of narcissism, as such a relationship has the potential to become toxic and abusive.

### **Spiritual Abuse of a Spouse**

One who attempts to take another person's right and distorts the *deen* (*talbis/tahrif*) or misapplies the principle is also guilty of spiritual abuse. As this topic is so vast, I will provide only a few examples.

In one instance, a woman who was being physically abused by her husband contacted the local imam. His only advice was to relate the hadith about the angels cursing a woman who is not intimate with her husband. This hadith, although sound in narration and having specific rulings attached to it, was inappropriate, a misapplication of what should have been said and advised. His response can be seen as a form of spiritual abuse, for it enabled the abuse to continue.

I have been consulted in a number of situations where the relationship between the wife and her mother-in-law is very toxic. Rather than working toward a solution, the husband and his parents misapplied the principle of respecting parents (*birr al walidayn*) and allowed the continued taking of the wife's rights (*huquq*). Both this and the preceding example illustrate Ali's (may Allah be pleased with him) statement: "A true statement that is used to attain falsehood (*batil*)."

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<sup>18</sup> In this regard, I recommend *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* by Susan Forward & Craig Buck, as well as *The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists: Coping with the One-Way Relationship in Work, Love, and Family* by Eleanor D. Payson LMSW.

### Centralized Leadership

Spiritual abuse can thrive in an unhealthy environment of paying extreme deference to a single leader, whether the term used is shaykh (masc. form), *shaykhah* (fem. form), *ustadh*, *ustadha*, imam, *amir*, *khalifa*, *wali*, *salih*, *pir*, *mullah*, and similar ones. All such titles denote his or her position as a caretaker (*raa'*) or "shepherd," and everyone will be asked about those in their care. Learning from and being led by others is a part of our *deen*. But this system can be exploited in the absence of an active system of checks and balances that enables people to question or push back when something seems odd.

If we look at "If it were not for the pushing back of Allah using some people over others, there would have been corruption on Earth" (2:2521), we can see that people pushing back manifests Allah's order on Earth. Those who suppress this practice, such as authoritarian and cult leaders, as well as narcissists, are sowing corruption.

One of Islam's defining qualities is that it teaches one to think deeply and critically. An examination of the *seerah* literature reveals many examples of the Sahaba or later generations seeking clarification, especially when things did not make sense to them. The Prophet nurtured this practice, such as discussing where to camp at Badr, praying '*asr* in Bani Quraydha, and the Companion who refused to obey his *amir*'s order to jump into the campfire.

Developing the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood is more than just being able to identify the immediately apparent, for that type of thinking can only see situations in black and white. This is called criminal and/or extremist thinking or generalized as cognitive distortions. Distinguishing truth from falsehood requires sophisticated thought. Suleiman tested Bilqees with the changes to her throne<sup>19</sup> after being told that she was feeble minded. Some scholars said this change was minor and a greater test to see if she noticed such subtlety.

One common point for such oppressors is that they oppose critical thinking by positioning themselves as the only ones who can make sense of the world, decide what their followers should do, and what is right. This type of centralized leadership and thought, when it goes to an extreme, can have very harmful repercussions. An extensive study conducted in Singapore of Muslims imprisoned for terrorist activities revealed that a key method in the path to extremism was the distortion (*talbis/tahrif*) of eight concepts. This same type of distortion occurs in those suicide cults that cause members to see self-sacrifice as the only way to freedom. On a much lower level of impact, this same type of

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<sup>19</sup> Quran 27:41

control and distortion can happen in the shaykh-student relationship, especially given certain traditions about what that relationship is supposed to look like.